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# THE REPORT OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON GRAMMATICAL NOMENCLATURE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE TEACHING OF FRENCH

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It is nothing more than human nature to be long-suffering under abuses of long standing, but to become quickly intolerant when any promised improvement fails to bring the expected—and needed—relief. For centuries the teaching of French grammar has been shackled and handicapped by grammatical traditions and considerations alien to French itself; one has blinked, as it were, the essential facts of the French language in order to make textbooks and the process of teaching conform to certain preconceived arrangements that have their justification in the teaching of the classical languages. but have none whatever in the teaching of modern French. The inevitable consequences are that the French grammars in use in schools and colleges only too often furnish an inefficient and highly uneconomical presentation of the facts of the language under consideration, and, more deplorable yet, they frequently ignore the fundamental and vital principles that make the French language what it actually is today. Certainly, in this age of “declaration of rights,” it does not seem untimely to make a stand for the right to face, even in the French classroom, the facts of the French language fairly and squarely as, to the best of our knowledge, they have been established by modern scholarship, and to make *truthful*, not merely *expedient*, statements concerning these facts. It is a foregone conclusion that the time is coming when this teaching attitude will not only be tolerated in the French classroom but actually demanded by the educational body politic: how else can the study of French ever be made to attain to anything like the “educational value” that the study of Latin has possessed for centuries, though the former is supplanting the latter more and more in the school curriculum of today?

Rome was, indeed, not built in a day, and even the most conscientious and aspiring teacher of French may have to rest content with helping to loosen gradually the time-honored shackles, feeling that something is achieved every time one or the other rattles to the ground. It seems hard, however, either to preach or to practice the same resignation when already fairly loosened shackles are once more firmly riveted, as seems to have been done in some cases by the Joint Committee on Grammatical Nomenclature, especially when the preface to the Report seemed to promise such welcome relief! It is against this riveting that, for my part, I should like to enter a respectful protest, at least for the following cases.

In the preface (p. vii) the following statements are made: "A given term should describe as exactly as possible the phenomenon to which it is assigned," and, farther on, "A term which is selected as the most exact characterization of a given phenomenon should be employed for every phenomenon identical in force." How is it possible heartily to indorse these statements and then to rest content with the terms "conjunctive and disjunctive" retained on p. 2?

Do the terms "conjunctive" and "disjunctive" really *exactly* describe the phenomenon of differentiation between *me* and *moi*, *il* and *lui* in French? And is not the differentiation between *mon* and (*le*) *mien* a phenomenon "identical in force," having a right therefore to the same name? Undoubtedly position is an important factor in French in the choice of the form of the personal pronoun (scarcely so much so in Italian, for which the terms "conjunctive" and "disjunctive" are even more glaringly misleading), but even today it remains only a secondary factor, the primary factor being still what it was in the beginning—stress. A lengthy discussion of this assertion would be out of place here. Two examples, one happily furnished by a recent number of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 Juillet 1914, p. 294), may suffice: *Il faudrait peut-être d'abord que lui songeât à moi*. The other is taken from Girault-Duvivier, I, p. 354: *Mes frères et mon cousin m'ont secouru, eux m'ont relevé, et lui m'a pansé*. In both examples the supposedly "disjunctive *lui* and *eux* are just as much "joined to the verb" as the more ordinary *il* and *ils* could ever be when placed in the same position, the real difference being obviously one of *stress*. The

terms "conjunctive" and "disjunctive" fail therefore to give the requisite "exact characterization" of the phenomenon of differentiation between personal pronouns; they are also open to the serious charge that they cannot be extended to the other phenomenon "identical in force," the differentiation of those words which are sometimes used with a noun and sometimes instead of a noun, for if the term "disjunctive" were applicable to words that stand instead of a noun, then all personal pronouns would *ipso facto* become disjunctive.

Now terms which do describe "as exactly as possible" the phenomenon of differentiation between originally identical words in French and other Romance languages, and which can be employed for "every phenomenon in the language identical in force," exist: they are not only commonly used in all more advanced study of Romance languages, but they have also found their way into elementary French grammars. These terms are "stressed" and "unstressed": "stressed" and "unstressed" personal pronouns, "stressed" and "unstressed" possessives, demonstratives, and interrogatives. "Tonic" and "atonic" would be equally good, and it is hard to understand why the committee should have passed up such excellent terms in favor of the inexact and insufficient "conjunctive" and "disjunctive."

The importance of "stress" in the inflection of verbs has within the last few years become *un fait acquis* for the better taught French classes, thanks in great measure, undoubtedly, to the recommendations of the Committee of Twelve. It would be no startling innovation to extend the explanation of the phenomenon of stress from the "syllable within the word" to the "word within the group," even in the most elementary teaching of grammar. It is so simple that any child can grasp it when clearly presented. The great majority of morphological peculiarities in French are due to the law or principle of the influence of stress, and can be accounted for by stating it; therefore it makes for economy and thoroughness in the acquisition of the morphological facts of the language as well as of a correct pronunciation, to acquaint the student of French from the very beginning with this surpassingly important peculiarity of the French language.

It is feasible, and highly economical of time and of effort, to give the students a survey of the field of French morphology, disregarding "grammatical categories" altogether at the first presentation, and taking as a guiding thread through the labyrinth the influence of stress, (1) on the spelling of French; (2) on the inflection of feminine words; (3) on the inflection of verbs; (4) on the differentiation of originally identical words within the stress-group. The continual application of the same principle (e.g., the feminine *fière*, or the verb *acquière*, or any other word of the same type, require the grave accent on the tonic *e* because we may not have a silent "e" in the stressed syllable of a word, and we indicate that "e" is not silent by placing a grave accent on it or doubling the consonant after it, etc.) instead of the perfunctory statement of numberless, apparently disconnected rules, "rubs it in" as no other process of instruction can do; moreover, when later the study of the grammatical categories is taken up in detail, the better students bring to it a growing *Sprachgefühl* that is conducive to excellent results. The memory is thus relieved of much burdensome detail, and is left much fresher to cope successfully with that side of language-work which it alone can accomplish, e.g., the acquisition of a vocabulary, and of "idioms."

The morphological effects of stress are in French no less in evidence than the morphological effects of declension are in Latin or in German: they are *facts of the language* that have a claim to recognition, not only because they actually exist, but also because this knowledge is helpful even in the most elementary stages of the study of French grammar. Undoubtedly one of the reasons why so many grammars ignore it completely, and others only recognize stress sparingly, chiefly in notes, is because their prototypes, the classical grammars, had to deal with no similar phenomenon, and consequently give no clue to its treatment. It is so much more important then to find at last for this essentially French phenomenon (even Italian is not affected to such a degree by stress-development) a term that "describes it as exactly as possible," and this the terms "conjunctive" and "disjunctive" entirely fail to do.

The next shackle whose riveting I should like to deplore is the name "past descriptive" given to the imperfect. My objections

to it can be expressed briefly in the words of the Report itself (p. 16), "Whatever principle of naming is adopted should be consistently maintained," and it seems perfectly obvious that the principle of naming that led to the felicitous choice of the names "present perfect," "past future," "past perfect," and "past absolute" (to my mind an admirable principle of naming) has for some unaccountable reason been abandoned in the case of the former "imperfect," with the result that the name "past descriptive" emphasizes a secondary and unessential characteristic, which is by no means always present in the tense itself, and which, moreover, under certain conditions this tense is bound to share with other tenses. The principle of naming that has determined the choice of the names "past future" and "past perfect" seems to suggest insistently the name "past present"; what objection can there be to its adoption?

It is probably owing to the facts of the French language itself that the classification of conditional sentences given in the Report (pp. 7, 24) scarcely seem to fit the case in French. In the first place it would be quite unpedagogic to distinguish between "present" and "future" conditions, the language, for good reasons, having only one form for both (this statement is not meant to apply to "indicative" conditions), and there is no good and sufficient reason why we should complicate matters in elementary teaching by pulling uselessly apart what the language itself has fused into one. In French it is the sense of the sentence or the context, not the form, that decides whether a condition is present, future, or both simultaneously. A classification based on time would have to concern itself with the content, not with the form of the sentence. The three types of condition which call for recognition, and for which good, distinctive names would be highly acceptable are the following:

(A) Conditions taking the indicative in both clauses.

(B) Conditions taking (a) the imperfect in the condition-clause and the conditional in the conclusion-clause, and (b) the pluperfect indicative or subjunctive in the condition-clause, and the past conditional or pluperfect subjunctive in the conclusion-clause.

(C) Conditions taking the conditional in both clauses (negligible in elementary teaching).

What is the difference between types (A) and (B)? Certainly not that the first are *neutral* and the second *contrary to fact*, for only (B) (b) conditions are necessarily contrary to fact; therefore the distinction between *neutral*, which would include all (A) and *some* (B) (a) conditions, and *contrary to fact conditions*, which would include all (B) (b) and *some* (B) (a) conditions, would be a distinction that would not properly distinguish, for it would group together what the students must precisely learn to keep apart, indicative and non-indicative conditions, and make a distinction which the language itself fails to recognize between contrary-to-fact present and not-contrary-to-fact present and future conditions, i.e., equal all (B) (a) conditions.

Incidentally it may be remarked that even from the English point of view the classification of conditions given in the Report seems incomplete: it leaves altogether out of consideration conditions of the type, "if he should be doing this, he would be in the right," "if he should have done this, he would have been in the right." The content makes these conditions sound rather awkward, but we constantly use and hear conditions of this type: "if he should be sick, it would be a pity."<sup>1</sup> Now there is just as much difference between a present condition of this type, and a present condition of the type, "If he is doing this, he is in the right," as between the future (more vivid), "If he shall do this (or, does this), he will be in the right," and the future (less vivid), "If he should do this, he would be in the right"; moreover, it is just exactly the same kind of difference, and if the terms "more and less vivid" describe the difference between the two future conditions as exactly as possible—and they undoubtedly do—it follows that they also describe it "as exactly as possible" for the present conditions. In English, then, it appears necessary to distinguish not between *two* types of present (and past) conditions but between *three*: contrary-

<sup>1</sup> Past conditions of this type are, it appears, somewhat infrequent. The following is taken from Brinkmann, *Syntax des Französischen und Englischen*, II, p. 622, "Thou wouldst oppose thy father then, should he have otherwise determined with thy person?"—Coleridge, *Piccol*. A present condition of this type: "If one of these (homebred and genuine sons of the soil) should be a little uncouth in speech, and apt to utter impertinent truth, he confesses that he is a real John Bull, and always speaks his mind."—Irving, *Sketch Book*, p. 28.

to-fact conditions, less vivid conditions, and "neutral" conditions. The fact that the term "neutral" cannot be used for future conditions, and that the distinction between less vivid and neutral present conditions is identical with the distinction between more and less vivid future conditions, would seem to call for the substitution of *more vivid* for *neutral* even with reference to present (and past) conditions.

The distinction that the French language makes between indicative conditions and non-indicative conditions is described, it seems to me, *as exactly as possible* for elementary teaching by the two terms "more" and "less vivid." We could then classify conditions in French as,

#### (A) MORE VIVID CONDITIONS

Any two tenses of the indicative that can logically be used together (with the required substitution of the present tense for the future in the condition-clause).

#### (B) LESS VIVID CONDITIONS

Condition-clause	Conclusion-clause
(a) Present and Future conditions	
(Present conditions <i>generally</i> contrary to fact)	
Imperfect Indicative	Present Conditional
(b) Past Conditions ( <i>always</i> contrary to fact)	
Pluperfect Indicative or Subjunctive	Past Conditional or Pluperfect Subjunctive

The "concessive" conditions, which take the conditional in both clauses, are not usually considered in elementary work; for more advanced work, they would necessitate an addition to, but no radical change in, this scheme.

A full discussion of the terms applied to the different mood-ideas expressed by the French subjunctive would imply a discussion of the nature of the mood itself, which would obviously be out of place here. But even without attempting to go very deep below the surface, there is one omission that must needs be mentioned. One of the chief functions of the subjunctive in modern French is to *indicate that the assertion is not made as a fact, but as something conceived in the mind of the speaker*, to express a thought, an idea. Indeed, Mr. Armstrong, from whom the foregoing definition is



quoted (cf. *Syntax of the French Verb*, p. 49) and others, whose opinion is equally worthy of consideration, hold this to be the mood-force *par excellence* that underlies all the uses of the French subjunctive. I cannot myself take this extreme position, as I "feel" too strongly that subjunctives of feeling and opinion are, both in Italian and French, used deliberately with the full consciousness of expressing a fact and not a thought, and how could it be otherwise with the characteristic Romance "sense of reality"? Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the French language uses the subjunctive to discriminate between fact and mere thought in a way unknown to Latin. This mood-idea is of the greatest importance even in the most elementary teaching, for once it is grasped the student holds in his hand the thread that will guide him safely through a labyrinth of apparently disconnected rules. It seems somewhat surprising that the Report, which has concerned itself with such secondary details as "*que*-clause of added condition," and "introductory *que*-clause," should have left nameless one of the if not *the* leading mood-idea of the French subjunctive, especially as several German grammars of the French language take cognizance of this mood-use, and name it. I have used for a number of years the designation "subjunctive of ideal statement" (which had been suggested by Hale-Buck's "Subjunctive of Ideal Certainty) and found it satisfactory for teaching, since students readily grasp its meaning when opposed to the term "statement of fact," and it is more comprehensive than the German term *irrealis*. Whether this name prove generally acceptable or not, this prepotent mood-force which dominates persistently if not always quite consistently, the choice of mood in French, seems entitled to formal recognition even in the American classroom by the bestowal of some name.